



Community Health Improvement Process

**2014-2015 Community Health Needs Assessment
Community Conversation with
Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities
June 10, 2015**

Introduction

Healthy Montgomery hosted a community conversation on health and well-being in partnership with the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities on Wednesday, June 10, 2015. The conversation took place from 6:30 to 8:00 pm during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Commission at the Montgomery County Executive Office Building in Rockville, MD. There were approximately 60 participants including Commission members and invited members of the public. All participants identified as a person with a disability, an advocate for people with disabilities, or both. The conversation was facilitated by Nancy Martin.

The community conversation included a discussion of what is meant by health and well-being at the individual and community levels, elements of a healthy community, community assets and challenges in Montgomery County, and practical steps to improve the health and well-being of the community. Participants engaged in both large and small group discussion, and were also offered the opportunity to contribute comments and feedback regarding the meeting in writing.

Defining Health and Well-Being

The group began its discussion by defining “healthy” for an individual. The group description included

- financial stability and access to meaningful employment;
- good eating, exercise, and sleep habits;
- stress-free access to medical and government services, including mental health and emergency medical services; and the
- ability to participate in pleasant activities, including leisure activities, as part of everyday life.

The group then worked to describe a health community, emphasizing the importance of:

- access to high-quality healthcare,
- seeking input from community members,
- providing accessible services and communicating about accessibility in community settings, and
- seeking to dissipate stigmas of disabilities, all in an environment that incorporates universal design and respects, appreciates, and anticipates differences and values people encouraging each other.

Assets that Support Health and Well-Being

Participants discussed community opportunities and assets of Montgomery County that allow for health and well-being, emphasizing the strengths detailed below.



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Montgomery County is a well-resourced community in a context conducive to residents' health and well-being.

- Montgomery County is part of the larger Washington, DC Metro area, with all the resources that brings (e.g., Metro, universities, federal government, etc.).
- Montgomery County is financially and intellectually strong.
- Montgomery County is a community that is compassionate and cares about everyone.
- Montgomery County is racially and ethnically diverse.
- Montgomery County has an extensive network of food banks and a strong homeless shelter system.
- Low-income residents can access pro bono legal services in Montgomery County.
- Montgomery County has a culture of volunteerism.
- Montgomery County has a network of well-maintained running and bike paths and a rapidly expanding bike share program.
- Residents of Montgomery County have access to high quality groceries and farmers markets.
- Montgomery County was an early adopter of local trans-fat and smoking bans.

Montgomery County is part of a Metropolitan area that offers excellent healthcare resources, including:

- availability of top-notch healthcare practitioners and facilities,
- increased eligibility for Medicaid with expansion of the state program (though there are still issues with eligibility and enrollment); and
- a good transportation network, including for medical services.

Montgomery County offers high-quality programming and services and encourages citizen participation by:

- Administering many well-maintained county facilities
- Hiring and training excellent County staff
- Engaging in effective outreach to youth
- The existence of County commissions, such as the Commission on People with Disabilities, an excellent example of people coming together with one voice to inform County decision-making
- Ensuring the public schools are very accessible
- Offering strong disability and aging services
- Offering excellent recreation services and well-maintained parks
- Advocating strongly for disability rights
- Offering the online Disability Network Directory, a great listing of organizations and resources for people with disabilities

Barriers to Health and Well-Being

Participants discussed obstacles to optimal health and well-being in Montgomery County, emphasizing the challenges detailed below.



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While Montgomery County offers many high-quality programs and services, coordination is often lacking.

- There is not enough coordination among different County departments, institutions, and community members to ensure resources are available to those who need them.
- It can be challenging for citizens to figure out what is available, and where, in order to take advantage of the many resources offered by the County.
- The County's customer service agents are often misinformed.
- There remain barriers to accessing services and resources, including lack of transportation or knowledge of whether a particular program is appropriate.

Because Montgomery County has many resources, this can lead to a misperception that everyone is wealthy. At the same time, rapid population growth may be outpacing the County's ability to increase much-needed resources.

- Access to affordable housing, childcare, and healthcare are major challenges for many citizens.
- The area suffers from extreme traffic congestion.
- Citizens often face long waitlists for services (and these appear to be getting longer).
- There is a lack of enough disabled parking.

Montgomery County could do more to ensure a healthy environment for people with disabilities.

- Deaf and hearing impaired residents find limited access to interpreters, with many public events not accessible.
- The County's ethnic diversity, while also a source of great strength, can create cross-cultural challenges vis-à-vis disability rights and inclusion.

Healthcare practitioners and facilities in Montgomery County could greatly improve their service to people with disabilities.

- Many providers do not accept Medicare, Medicaid, or certain private insurance.
- Healthcare costs are high, especially for people with higher than average healthcare needs.
- Area hospitals charge high facility fees just for walking in the door.
- The vast majority of physicians and other healthcare providers lack the knowledge to appropriately serve people with disabilities.

Montgomery County could do more to ensure public transit is effectively serving people with disabilities.

- Metro Access is unreliable and therefore cannot be counted on for appointments.
- Bus shelters and benches are often absent.
- Bus drivers do not always enforce ADA to make sure people with disabilities get priority seating.
- Housing options for people with disabilities are limited.
- Postsecondary options for students with disabilities are limited.

Practical Steps to Improve Health and Well-Being

Participants identified specific actions to improve the health and well-being of the community, including the priorities and other practical suggestions discussed below.



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PRIORITIES (mentioned or “voted for” by numerous participants)

1. Montgomery County should ensure healthcare professionals and facilities are fully prepared to serve people with disabilities. (This was by far the top priority across the board.) Some specific actions suggested by participants include:
 - Make sure healthcare facilities are accessible for people with disabilities, perhaps through tax incentives for improvements in facilities.
 - Leverage state medical license authority to mandate regular training of medical providers on how to best address the spectrum of disabilities.
 - Offer professional development training for physicians and other healthcare providers on working with people with disabilities to increase awareness and skill in working with this population, including knowledge of community resources for referring patients, and understanding of the ADA.
 - Offer incentives for practitioners to treat people with disabilities, including those unable to afford treatment
2. Montgomery County should work to increase coordination between and among its departments, the community, and County legislators.
3. Montgomery County should simplify information about available services and how they may be accessed.
4. Montgomery County should make it easier for people with disabilities and their families and caregivers to learn about available services, resources, and events. Some ideas for implementation include:
 - Offer a calendar of healthy events, targeting those eligible for ADA to link them to services
 - Organize a large advocacy conference and community resource fair to highlight programs, initiatives, and services for people with disabilities and their families.
4. Montgomery County should revamp its websites to make them more user-friendly and current. Additionally, any information available online should be accessible to people using screen readers.
5. Montgomery should focus more attention on mental health issues, including depression.
6. Montgomery County should ensure more inclusive and better-supported recreation programming for people with disabilities, including providing reliable transportation in coordination with recreation services.
7. Montgomery County should create an accessibility designation for restaurants and other businesses and organizations and offer incentives for them to participate in programs on accessibility



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8. Montgomery County should work to increase reliability of MetroAccess.
9. Montgomery County should increase programming to decrease prejudice and raise public awareness about disability.
10. Montgomery County should increase its enforcement of disabled parking.

OTHER PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS (Not “voted” as priorities)

- Offer “care for caregivers” programs tailored to informal (family) primary caregivers of people with disabilities.
- Encourage student service learning projects assisting people with disabilities (e.g., library book delivery).
- Improve County Council involvement in skilled facility discharge.
- Require fast-food restaurants to offer more healthy choices.
- Create a hotline or website to link people newly diagnosed with disabilities to resources in the County.
- Offer free and low-cost health and dental services.
- Increase employment and self-sufficiency of people with disabilities.
- Increase low-cost housing options for people with disabilities.
- Partner with local farms to provide low-income residents with increased access to nutritious food.
- Publish the County’s funding priorities by disability to promote transparency.
- Institute a faster ID program for people with new diagnoses.

Community Conversation Feedback

Participants were provided an opportunity to give written feedback about the meeting. In a short closeout survey, participants were asked, “Is there anything else that you want us to know, including what you like or did not like about this community conversation?” A few participants responded to this question and their comments are provided below.

Thank you. This has been a helpful conversation.



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These groups are not representative of the 31% of people with hearing loss, or of people affected by dementia or autism.

It was great. We need more of these.

Great effort. Thank you!

This was great.